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America's Lack of Literary Tradition. ❀



N English critic writing in the literary supplement of the London "Times" finds lack of design one of the chief faults of American authors. He also points out that the great literary traditions that Amer-

ica may consider itself to have inherited from England, are of so little avail against the new and incongruous background furnished by America that practically we have no literary foundation at all. One of our chief difficulties in creating a national literature he attributes largely to this incongruity between supposed tradition and background. In England, literature and setting may be said to have evolved each other. English literature sprang from English environment and English environment has, in turn, been changed and developed under influences fostered by English literature, each modifying, chastening and vivifying the other. We, on the other hand, have striven to foster the English literary tradition in a soil wholly

THE foreign to it; while those bold spirits who, like
LOTUS Whitman, have sought to rid themselves of it,
have, in the attempt, been obliged to do violence
to the English language and create a kind of
argot of their own. Incidentally, the critic of
the London "Times" turns his attention to the
work of our most intellectual literary critic,
Mr. W. C. Brownell, in whom he discovers those
qualities of aloofness and evasiveness that so
often cause subtle reasoning to defeat itself by
failing to reach conclusions that are definite.



IN speaking of lack of design in our literature,
the English critic admits design in the best
work of Mark Twain, in the best stories of Bret
Harte and in some of Whitman's poems. "But
these authors also in their failures fail chiefly
from lack of design or from some incon-
gruity between form and matter.

"This no doubt is what we should expect of
a literature that begins late and is subject to
many conflicting influences of mature foreign
literatures. For English literature in its effects
upon American is worse than foreign. It is a
little more than kin and less than kind.

"It would have been well for the Americans if we had never had any writers worth imitating. Then the English language would have been theirs altogether for literary purposes. As it is, Whitman has had to make a queer language for himself, and Lowell has done best in dialect. Mr. Brownell says that American literature suffers for lack of a background; rather, we should say, it suffers because its background is incongruous with English literary traditions.



"We think it pedantic in Americans to dislike the feudalism of Scott. They do so probably because Scott to them is a writer talking in their own tongue of things foreign to them. English readers often have the same distaste for American local color, and it would be stronger if American literature had an enormous prestige and an illustrious past, if it imposed upon us forms and traditions unsuited to our own emerging national character.



"THE Elizabethan drama is of no use to the modern English playwright who tries to be a serious artist, for the English drama must be made afresh if it is to exist at all. And the whole

THE of English literature has much the same relation
LOTUS to Americans who are trying to make a literature of their own.

"It is difficult for them to ignore it, yet they can get little help from it. If there had been no English poetry we may conjecture that Whitman would not have played such tricks with language. Consciously or unconsciously, he tried to get rid of English poetic associations not only in his themes but also in his vocabulary. When he called some of our most accomplished poets feudals he really meant that all their romance would be second hand in America, just as blank verse is second hand in modern English drama.

"Whitman had great strength of character, yet he was constantly hampered by this determination not to borrow any of his poetry from a foreign source. His case is only an obvious instance of the difficulties under which American authors labor and in spite of which they have produced many remarkable works.

"So many great things have been done by English writers in the past that English writers in the present are afraid of the grand manner and prefer to seem original triflers. But the

Americans have no great literary tradition of their own, and they feel that it is a mighty task to make one. They have given up the idea that they can create a literature as quickly as they built Chicago.



“INDEED now to judge from Mr. Brownell and other critics they are inclined to depreciate what they have done already and to be daunted by the superiority of Europe. But at the same time they are anxious to escape from English thralldom, which seems to them, perhaps, more oppressive than it does to us. They have lost interest in those American writers who are only transatlantic Englishmen and whose accomplishment has been too easy for that reason.

“Thus Mr. Brownell does not include Washington Irving among his masters of American prose. At best probably he would include him among the masters of English prose, nor is he ever for a moment tempted to speak too kindly of his chosen writers. He is not one of those Americans, now probably obsolete, who think that any kind of writing must be wonder-

THE
LOTUS ful in an American; rather he takes a pride in
judging Americans as severely as if they were
Europeans.

"So his book will arouse no national prejudices in England. Indeed we are now pretty free from national prejudice in our estimates of American books. We take them on their merits, and when we find them uninteresting it is either because they are so or because our taste is bad. It is not because we think that no American can write. Indeed most of us probably think more kindly of Mr. Brownell's six authors than he does.

"He is openly hostile to Poe, almost angry at his European reputation; he says more about the defects than about the merits of Hawthorne and Lowell, and he is at great pains to explain why Mr. James is not a great writer.



"COOPER is the only one of his authors who, he thinks, is undervalued. Emerson he considers the greatest of Americans, but he has a shrewd eye for his faults. In the case of Poe Mr. Brownell seems to us unjust. Poe did come off, not in his most popular works, but in

the 'MS. Found in a Bottle,' in certain short poems, such as 'The Sleeper' unknown to most of those who admire 'The Raven,' and above all in the wonderful fantasy called 'The Power of Words,' which Mr. Brownell does not mention.



"The best of Poe could be printed in a very few pages, but in the general opinion of Europe at least it is the best that American literature has yet produced being better than anything else of the same kind in the whole world."

Finally the critic regards Mr. Brownell as only an instance of American writers in general, all of whom have no long literary traditions all their own of which they may stand in awe and thus be kept from becoming overserious.

To this I may add that to take oneself, one's surroundings and activities overseriously, is one of the surest signs of provincialism—and provincialism is one of the greatest defects from which American literature suffers.

